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AUTHOR Krumboltz, John D.
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ABSTRACT

There are three steps to challenging troublesome career beliefs: identifying the troublesome belief; considering alternative ways to viewing the underlying problem; and taking action incompatible with the troublesome belief. Each of these steps includes techniques which empower clients by providing them with information or enabling them to make their own discoveries. The Career Beliefs Inventory (CBI) (Krumboltz, 1991) allows counselors to open up important areas typically ignored in traditional forms of career counseling, e.g., ways of responding to the possibility of failure. Counseling techniques to help clients consider alternative views include: reframing the problem; countering a troublesome belief; defining a manageable problem; using humor for perspective; and discovering disconfirming evidence. Techniques to help clients take action include: roleplaying; cognitive practicing; and behavioral practicing. (ABL)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services

2108 School of Education
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259

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Challenging Troublesome Career Beliefs

John D. Krumboltz

Introduction

We all have career beliefs—assumptions about ourselves and what we must do to succeed in the world of work. Some of those beliefs can cause difficulties. For example, do you believe that success is due to hard work or to being in the right place at the right time? Your answer could influence your future actions.

Burns (1980) has pointed out, you feel the way you think: "Every bad feeling you have is the result of your distorted negative thinking" (p. 28). People act in a way consistent with their beliefs and feelings.

Consider the belief: "I'll never be able to find a job." Why is that a troubling belief? If you really believe you can't find a job, there is no point looking. And if you don't look, you certainly won't find a job. So the belief becomes a self-fulfilling—and self-defeating—prophesy.

Clients generally come to counseling because they are unhappy, frustrated, distressed, and/or engaged in some self-defeating pattern of behavior. They want to feel better. Despite the years of work by Ellis, Beck, Burns, Dorn and others, many clients are surprised to learn that to feel better they will have to change the way they think. So counselors will frequently need to provide a rationale to explain how positive thinking can lead to happier emotions and more constructive behavior.

There are three steps to challenging troublesome career beliefs: (1) Identifying the troublesome belief, (2) Considering alternative ways of viewing the underlying problem, and (3) Taking action incompatible with the troublesome belief. Each step includes some specific techniques. All of these techniques empower clients by providing them with information or enabling them to make their own discoveries.

Identifying the Troublesome Belief

A skilled counselor can **listen carefully** to a client's tale of woe and pick up many assumptions, presuppositions and beliefs that may be getting in the way. The process may be facilitated with the use of the *Career Beliefs Inventory* (CBI) (Krumboltz, 1991). The CBI is an instrument which, when used sensitively by a qualified professional, can help people identify the beliefs that might be blocking them. The CBI will be most useful when administered at the beginning of the counseling process. The resulting scores will help the counselor more quickly hone in on the beliefs and assumptions most likely in need of examination.

This instrument allows counselors to open up important areas that are typically ignored in traditional forms of career counseling, e.g., ways of responding to the possibility of failure. The CBI makes career counseling more complete; it legitimizes the exploration of important attitudes and assumptions.

Alternative Ways of Viewing the Underlying Problem

Group counseling may be particularly helpful because clients can contribute a variety of perspectives to each others' problems. Some specific counseling techniques can also help.

Reframing the Problem

Reframing involves seeing a problem from another viewpoint. Suppose we have a client with a low score on CBI Scale 23, Negotiating/Searching. She has been employed in a small retail store for five years when the position of buyer opens up. She would like the promotion but feels she can't ask for it because she does not want to appear "pushy" or "selfish." The counselor might say, "Let's look at the problem from your boss' viewpoint. What kind of a person would he like to be a buyer?"

If the client can see that she has the desired qualities and that taking some initiative would be good for the store and for her boss, she might overcome her reluctance. The counselor could reframe the problem in terms of the client's fundamental goals, helping others, not self-aggrandizement.

Countering a Troublesome Belief

Some troublesome beliefs are simple misunderstandings or faulty facts. They can be countered with a statement of fact. Suppose Chip who is 5' 7" wants to be a police officer but believes that to qualify he must be at least 5' 8". A statement that not all police departments have a height requirement may open up a whole world of opportunities for Chip. Nevo (1987) has published an article describing counters to ten major beliefs.

Countering a deeply ingrained belief requires more than logic. It requires consistent repetition. Many people have grown up in environments where negative messages predominate.

To counter negative beliefs the counselor can use positive supporting words. "You are strong." "You can do it." "You are making progress." The message must be genuine, and it needs

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reiteration. Some clients use a tape recorder to play back their positive messages.

Defining a Manageable Problem

Some people define their own problems in ways that make it impossible to solve them. This is the "I should have decided yesterday how I'm going to spend the rest of my life" problem. This problem is apparent on the CBI in a pattern of scores on Scales 2, 3 and 16.

Clients can be reinforced for not having foreclosed options so that they can now explore several possibilities. The counselor can also point out that it is not necessary to plan the rest of one's life, that it may be quite sufficient to decide what to try next. The client needs to be given permission to take the time necessary to plan the next step. The initially massive problem can be broken down into a series of manageable mini-steps.

Using Humor for Perspective

Nevo (1986) has advocated that career counselors use a sense of humor in dealing with the serious problems they confront. While most uses of humor need to be spontaneous recognitions of the absurdities of life, some advance planning can be useful.

Nevo mentioned the work of Katz who used cartoons to clarify career issues. She also pointed out associations between love and work. Those with a low score on CBI Scale 23 who despair of finding the one right job are like those who hope to find Mr. Right or Ms. Right, the perfect predestined mate. Pointing out similarities like this may lead to a rueful insight.

Discovering Disconfirming Evidence

The counselor cannot know whether a given belief is accurate or not, but the counselor can encourage some exploration if the client's belief appears to be impeding progress. In the CBI Manual (Krumboltz, 1991) a six-step procedure is suggested for helping clients investigate their assumptions. Each step is illustrated with possible counselor and client statements. The essence of the idea that clients be helped to ask questions of people or consult references to find out whether their assumptions are accurate.

Taking Actions Incompatible with the Troublesome Belief

Roleplaying

We tend to adopt beliefs that are consistent with our own behavior. If you want someone to adopt a different belief, you may wish to get that person to act in a way consistent with the new belief. Roleplaying is an ideal way to get people to try out new behaviors in a safe environment.

Research in social psychology demonstrates rather convincingly that improvisational roleplaying of behavior inconsistent with one's previous behavior is an effective mechanism for change (McGuire, cited in Zimbardo and Leippe, 1991).

Cognitive Practicing

Clients can be taught to rehearse positive verbal statements about themselves to begin replacing the negative verbal statements that were drilled into their heads from earlier experiences. They can be taught to label their behavior, not themselves; they can practice saying, "I goofed" but not "I'm goofy."

Behavioral Practicing

Behavioral practice is trying out a new behavior in the real world just like roleplaying is trying out a new behavior in the safety of a counseling session. The key is for the clients to experiment by acting in a way opposite to what they believe.

Burns (1980) tells about an artist in the throes of a major depression who became convinced that he could not even draw a straight line anymore and as a result didn't do any art work at all. "When his therapist suggested he test his conviction by actually attempting to draw a line, it came out so straight he began drawing again and soon was symptom-free!" (p. 76). No amount of persuasion by the therapist would have worked. The artist had to observe his own behavior.

Summary

If you want to help clients whose own beliefs are causing distress or inhibiting them from taking necessary action, you can lead them through three steps: (1) Find out specifically the belief that is causing the trouble, (2) Help them see the problem from another viewpoint or discover for themselves that the belief is false, and (3) Encourage them to try out behaviors that challenge their troublesome belief.

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John D. Krumboltz, Ph.D., is Professor of Education and Psychology at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

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